

Can the Internet survive the common backhoe?

I've been unplugged.

Working out of a home office for almost 10 years, I rely heavily on all the modern-day accoutrements of the wired office. Fax, voice mail, multiple phone lines, E-mail and Internet access, Web servers in my basement: I've got it all.

Technology has become a crucial part of my business day. Which means that when it all disappears, as it did a day ago, I become lost.

Wednesday morning, a company's crew came to install a lawn sprinkler system. We had done everything we were told to: we contacted the gas, telephone, cable and other companies to ensure that our lawn would be marked with the location of various wires and pipes. Someone didn't do a good job, it seems, because soon after work began, my cable and telephone lines were cut.

It's a dreadful transition to go from being hyperconnected to becoming unplugged. Stranded in my office with nothing but my trusty cellphone, I crawled the walls, trying to figure out how to do my work. I ran over to the neighbours to check my E-mail, and doubtlessly will return again.

Such a loss of connectivity makes you think of the risks of the complex wired economy we are building. Its fragility became clear several months ago when a fire in a Bell Canada central office in Toronto caused almost instant havoc with nation-wide telephone, Internet and other services.

Communication outages once weren't so important. But as the world of electronic business takes hold, many companies will encounter big problems when their transaction and E-commerce systems disappear. And there are huge opportunities for things to go wrong, given that a typical E-business initiative involves many players in different locations.

Consider my own situation. Aside from the communication links I have at home, my on-line activities involve locations that are tremendously dispersed. My on-line store is based on a computer somewhere in the state of New York — I think, but I'm not quite sure. It is linked to a credit card transaction processing company based in California, which communicates to various financial institutions in Toronto.

The entry point to my store is located on my main Web site, situated on a computer in Toronto. The company hosting the site connects



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with the Canadian representative of a U.S. organization, meaning that a lot of the Internet traffic to my store is funnelled through computers and communication lines somewhere in Virginia.

And some of the audio and video elements within my site originate with another firm in Vancouver.

My situation is rather simple compared with many big, complicated Internet initiatives. Yet there are lots of places where things may go wrong, and where lines may get innocently cut. I had never thought of the need for contingency planning, but I do now.

Which leads to this question: How many E-commerce initiatives are paying appropriate attention to backup communication methods and redundancy in their communication links? From what I have seen, not many. Do they even know where the complex networks that makes up their E-commerce initiatives are located?

We are told that the Internet was designed in such a way that it could survive a nuclear war. On a grand scale, that may be true. But I've come to learn that it is no match for the common backhoe.

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